



Design you can afford

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Architect Ken Woolley and others are on a mission to create well-built family homes that don't cost the Earth.

Architects are diversifying from wealthy clients to design prefabricated and project homes as housing affordability continues to bite into budgets.

Queensland developer Toby Lewis's frustrations with regulations have led him to launch a range of architecturally designed prefabricated houses for his company Happy Haus.

A three-bedroom house costs about \$200,000. Since launching last year, he has taken 20 deposits of \$2000 each from buyers.

The buyer then has the design approved by their council before the house is assembled.

Meanwhile, high-end Sydney-based architectural firm Durbach Block is working on a project called The Clock House, which is intended for sites inside Sydney's footprint.

"The current estimate [on price] is approximately \$220,000," says firm partner Camilla Block. The original project home architect, Ken Woolley, is back in the market with a revamped version of his designs for the developers Pettit and Sevitt.

"I think it's something worth doing ... I guess it's kind of a duty," Woolley says. Val Sevitt, wife of the late Ron Sevitt, says the cost of the basic "Lowline" is \$360,000, plus site and council costs.

The Lowline is expected to be built at HomeWorld at Kellyville in March. "Ken's very passionate about it and we're all very excited about it, too," Mrs Sevitt says.

"The Pettit and Sevitt House has stayed in everyone's eye." Environmental architect Tone Wheeler claims to have started a "minor revolution" by devising the first "custom project" home in decades.

It may seem like a contradiction in terms but Wheeler insists he has struck the perfect formula, combining the cost-saving measures refined by project home builders with architectural design.

He has signed contracts for three houses in Sydney, each to cost as little as \$400,000 to build.

"[There is] a niche in the market. It [is] a niche that we thought we should occupy from a moral point of view. We could no longer sustain an architectural product where we have wealthy clients only," Wheeler says.

With the vast majority of Sydney's houses built without an architect, his endeavours were rewarded this year by the NSW chapter of the Australian Institute of Architects.

He won a special jury prize for trying to bring design to a broader market. Wheeler believes design is generally given a low priority in the housing market and it's impossible to say how many homes are architect-designed.

"Because we (Australians) are not interested in design, nobody knows what the real figures are," Wheeler says. Perhaps the disinterest Wheeler perceives is in fact a matter of affordability. Some of Sydney's top architects are trying to work out ways to overcome this.

A \$400,000 design

So cheap is Wheeler's design that he managed to convince his first clients to abandon plans to sell their Kensington home and instead to knock down and rebuild a four-bedroom family home on their existing site.

The Lims had received quotes from other architects that indicated it would be cheaper to sell and move than to renovate their two-storey yellow-brick house.

"We tried to move quite a few times but we didn't end up finding anywhere that was perfect for us," says client Emma Lim. "[Now] we don't have to pay stamp duty to sell."

The cost of rebuilding was so much lower than a renovation that they added a long list of more expensive finishes on to the plans including floorboards, composite stone in the bathroom and

laundry and ducted air-conditioning.

Wheeler sent them to visit his first design, the Logic, at display village HomeWorld in Kellyville.

"We thought: 'It's not going to do any harm to have a look.' We could afford to spend a bit more than a project home," Emma Lim recalls.

Although the basic home costs about \$400,000 to build, the final project ended up costing \$700,000 because the couple added their long list of features.

Controlling the cost

Like the original Pettit and Sevitt houses of the 1960s and built mostly in North Shore suburbs such as St Ives, Wheeler's idea is based on a module.

This allows him to control construction costs and give his clients a guaranteed price. "We know exactly how big spaces are," he says.

Ultimately, Wheeler wants the entire design to be prefabricated but cannot offer this until customer orders increase.

"The idea is that we are working on concepts, not plans," he says. Wheeler is working with the project home company Cosmopolitan Homes, a family business that started out at Moorebank in 1964.

Its managing director, Michael Condoleon, says he uses architects, including Allen Jack + Cottier and Caroline Pidcock, for 90 per cent of the houses he sells.

Since about 80 per cent of his customers are not interested in whether or not his products are architecturally designed, it is not a big marketing point.

However, any customer who has inspected other project homes tends to notice the difference an architect makes. "They won't come in with that on their checklist but they will notice," Condoleon says.

"We are looking for an edge ... One of my goals is that the first thing they do is say 'wow'." Under most arrangements, architects hand over their plans to a project home company and are paid royalties for designs that are sold.

But under Wheeler's new venture, Cosmopolitan Homes remains the builder and Wheeler does not let go of the plans. Just as with a bespoke house, he takes the plans to council for approval, authorises any variation in the construction and answers certification inquiries.

He takes advantage of Cosmopolitan's ability to keep costs down by reducing the use of steel in a building, minimising plumbing and ensuring that measurements are in keeping with the size of materials, reducing the need to cut bricks and plasterboard on-site.

The new Woolley house

Ken Woolley said he found house buyers' tastes had changed when he dusted off his old Pettit and Sevitt plans.

Whereas his original modular house was presented in its three-bedroom design, the new version will have four bedrooms to fit demand.

He says the rooms themselves have also increased in size by about 10 per cent.

"I think that's become something of a reasonable norm, given most kids have their own computer and the tendency is to have more sports junk than in the 1960s and 1970s."

But he is horrified by the overregulation of building that increases costs and extends the time taken to get a house built.

Whereas a Pettit and Sevitt house could be built in three to four months from the time of the customer's order, it could now take well over a year.

He estimates the costs of paying council fees and meeting the environmental requirements of the BASIX regime, the NSW building sustainability index, to be about \$50,000 for a \$300,000 house.

"You have got to wonder whether the benefits from it match that [cost]," he says. "Our old Pettit and Sevitts would never have complied with BASIX. [But] have they been such bad houses for 40 years?"

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